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SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [MY](#)

SUBJECT: MALAYSIA: UPDATE ON THE "ALLAH" ISSUE AND CHURCH ATTACKS

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 11 -- THREE CHURCHES ATTACKED
OVERNIGHT

[1](#)B. KUALA LUMPUR 03 -- COURT RULING ON THE USE OF
'ALLAH'

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Following three separate attacks on churches over the night of January 7-8 (ref A), unknown individuals made another nine attacks on churches and a mosque over the weekend, according to senior police officials at a special briefing for the diplomatic corps on January 11 at the Ministry of Home Affairs. Police briefers stressed that the incidents were sporadic and not planned, and that the Government was committed to protecting religious facilities across the country and to ensuring civil order. The police and senior Home Affairs officials clarified the government's position in the 'Allah' case (ref B) and stressed how sensitive the issue is to ethnic Malays. They indicated investigations into the attacks are ongoing but that no concrete leads have been developed. They also provided details of the church attacks but stressed that the actual damage, except in the first attack, was relatively minor. Both the Prime Minister and Home Minister issued statements over the weekend committing the government to tough actions against perpetrators of these crimes. The Prime Minister also promised assistance to rebuild and repair damaged churches, the Prime Minister's Department said interfaith dialogues would be held, and Muslim NGO groups offered help guarding churches. While many weekend editorials expressed dismay at the attacks, some continued to defend the right of Muslims to demonstrate and express anger about the High Court's December 31 ruling that the GOM's prohibition on the Catholic Herald's use of the word 'Allah' was unconstitutional. End Summary.

ATTACKS CONTINUE OVER THE WEEKEND

[1](#)2. (SBU) As of January 11, there have been eleven attacks on churches, and one on a small mosque, in Malaysia since the first three attacks overnight on January 7 (ref A). Over the January 9-10 weekend, eight more churches and a small mosque were attacked, raising the total to twelve. Unlike the first few attacks on January 8, which only took place in Kuala Lumpur and nearby Selangor, incidents over the weekend occurred in other parts of the country: in addition to one more in the KL area, there were three in Perak, one in Malacca, one in Penang, one in Negeri Sembilan, and one in Sarawak (on Malaysian Borneo). According to police, most of the attacks involved hit-and-run tactics, whereby the attackers would throw poorly made Molotov cocktails, bricks,

or plastic bags full of paint on the churches. None of the additional attacks caused damage valued at over 1,000 Malaysian Ringgit (RM) (approximately \$300 USD), and only one person was lightly injured: a pastor, when confronting three attackers who stormed into his church, was pushed to the ground.

BRIEFING THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS

13. (SBU) Home Affairs Secretary General Mahmood Adam led a government briefing of the diplomatic corps on January 11 at the Home Ministry. The DCM, Poloff, and RSO attended from the Mission. SecGen Mahmood began by stressing that "things are under control", noting that no incidents had occurred over the last 12 hours. (Note: There was another attack that took place during the previous night, but news of the attack was not released until after the briefing. End Note.) He emphasized the government's commitment to protect religious facilities. Mahmood and the briefing team devoted a significant amount of time to laying out the background and government's position with regard to the 'Allah' case and its appeal to the Court. Mahmood commented that the government's case was focused on "publication" of the word Allah by non-Muslim groups and not on the casual oral use of the word.

He asserted that this is a very sensitive issue among Muslim Malays that foreigners would find difficult to comprehend. He downplayed the damage of the attacks, noting that with the exception of the very first attack which gutted a church in Kuala Lumpur, none of the incidents resulted in damage greater than 1,000 RM (\$300 USD). A police inspector provided details of each incident, noting that most of the attacks had no witnesses, and very little forensic evidence that was usable in identifying the perpetrators. With one exception, the police think that all of the incidents were carried out by different parties, commenting "these attacks were not planned or organized. There were no big groups involved. They are expressions of dissatisfaction."

14. (SBU) Following the briefing, several questions were posed by members of the diplomatic corps. Most notable was a query posed by the French Ambassador as to why use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslim groups in Malaysia was such a controversial issue, when in Indonesia and several Middle Eastern countries it is not. SecGen Mahmood replied that Malaysia was different and that "to be fair, you have to compare an apple with an apple." Mahmood went on to say that just like Christianity has different branches such as Catholicism, Protestants, etc., so does Islam, and that Malays follow "Ahli Sunnah wal Jamaah". (Comment: "Ahli Sunnah wal Jamaah," is simply the Arabic term for Sunni Islam, which is not different from Islam as practiced widely in the Middle East nor neighboring Indonesia. End Comment.)

GOVERNMENT WORDS AND ACTIONS OVER THE WEEKEND

15. (SBU) Prime Minister Najib visited the site of the most serious church attack on January 8 and pledged RM 500,000 (about USD \$130,000) in government funds to repair the affected churches. A chorus of ministers joined Najib in condemning the attacks. Home Affairs Minister Hishamuddin Hussein (PM Najib's nephew) was quoted on the front page of the January 11 Malay-language Utusan Malaysia saying that he would not hesitate to implement the Internal Security Act (ISA), because if these incidents were left unchecked it "could disrupt peace and harmony" in Malaysia. (Comment: Hishamuddin also stressed that other laws -- arson, vandalism, etc. -- would be used to charge anyone involved with these attacks, implying that the Najib administration could selectively arrest people whose statements might otherwise provoke discontent. His mention of the ISA is seen by some as a thinly-veiled warning to the opposition to cease accusing the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) party of being the root of the problem. End Comment.)

MEDIA RESPONSE

¶6. (SBU) Parallel with this law-and-order approach to the church attacks has been another narrative in the vernacular papers suggesting that Catholic/Christian use of the word 'Allah' is the root of the problem, and that the Catholic Herald and others -- mainly Christians in Sarawak and Sabah -- should gracefully stop using the word. The front page editorial cartoon in the January 11 edition of Utusan Malaysia (the ruling party's Malay language mouthpiece) cites a statement from the Christian head of the Sabah Development Institute, Clarence Bongkos, who suggested over the weekend that Christians voluntarily stop using Allah, which he said would be no problem. "That would be the best solution," the cartoon's straight man concludes. Other articles have made clear that the Allah controversy feeds into national politics. Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim commented "Much of the blame for the recent attacks can be placed at the doorstep of the UMNO-led BN (National Front) ruling party. Its incessant racist propaganda over the Allah issue and the inflammatory rhetoric issued by government-controlled mainstream media, especially Utusan Malaysia, are reprehensible." Citing opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's charge, an op-ed writer counterattacked in Utusan's weekend edition, saying that it was Anwar who was trying to "burn up the masses" by accusing UMNO of racism. The ironies include the fact that in the 1980s Anwar was instrumental in forming one of the Malay student organizations, ABIM, that is now vocally asserting that non-Muslims may not use "Allah."

NO REPORTS OF INCIDENTS INVOLVING AMCITS

¶7. (SBU) As of January 11, 2010, American Citizen Services (ACS) has not received any reports of Americans who have been hurt or effected as a result of these religiously motivated attacks.

KEITH